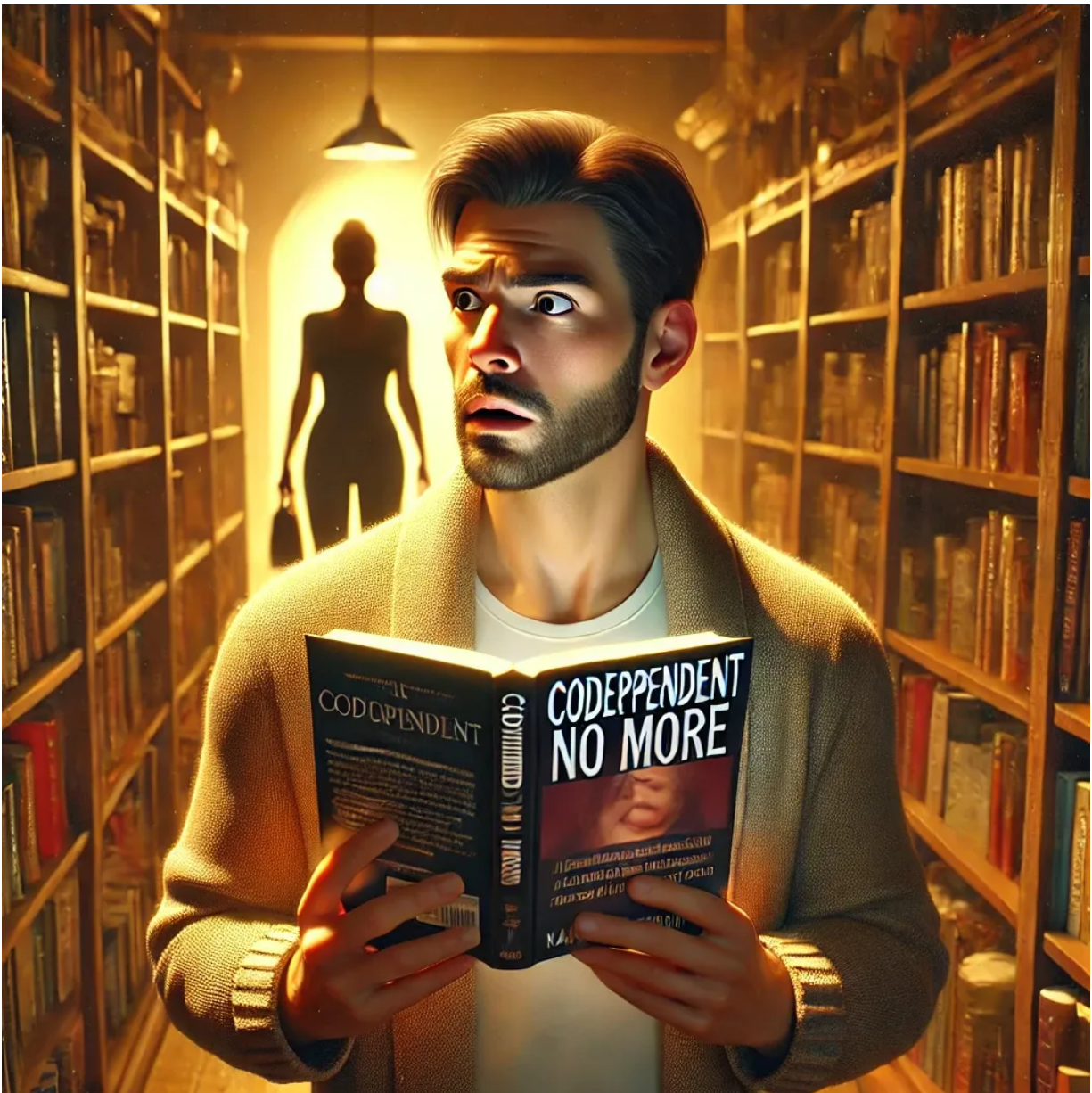


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Dear *Permission to be Powerful* Reader, It sat there, right at the entrance of Barnes & Noble—

Codependent No More.

It felt like a divine conspiracy, like the universe had left me a message I couldn't ignore.

I picked it up, skimmed the first few pages, and something inside me shifted. The words reached into my chest and pulled at a problem I couldn't name until that moment.

For years, I had lived my life in someone else's shadow. We were attached at the hip. I had no friends, no social life, and no time for myself. And I called that love.

I didn't know it then, but buying that book was the beginning of the end.

At the time, I thought I had everything I wanted. A partner who loved me, a marriage that looked solid from the outside. But beneath that was a constant, quiet pressure—a slow erosion of self.

It wasn't just the little things—like never choosing the music on road trips or being unable to have a night to myself. It was bigger than that.

She dictated where we lived and who we saw. Who I could still be close to.

At some point, without realizing it, I had become an extension of her life rather than the main character in my own.

I'd mention wanting to see my family, and suddenly, there'd be tension. A guilt trip. A list of reasons why they were terrible for me.

So, I stopped trying.

Stopped calling as much.

Stopped making plans.

Until one day, I looked up and realized I was completely isolated.

That day at Barnes & Noble, I was trying to browse. A simple trip to the bookstore, like we always did. She'd lose herself in the aisles, and I'd follow.

But that book was waiting for me. *Codependent No More*.

I flipped through it, and suddenly, it felt like I wasn't alone in my experiences.

I read about the patterns:

- How codependents make themselves small to keep the peace.
- How they twist themselves into knots to keep their partner happy.
- How they forget who they are in the process.

I wasn't the romantic, devoted partner I thought I was. I was drowning in a dynamic that I couldn't even see clearly.

It was a gut punch.

I wasn't "choosing love."

I was choosing survival.

When I first started setting boundaries, the resistance came fast.

I wanted to take a salsa class. She got upset.

I wanted to spend time alone. That turned into a fight.

I wanted to reconnect with my family. That was treated as betrayal.

The book had planted a seed, but breaking free would take much more than reading about it. It would take tearing my whole world apart.

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I remember the first time I realized I had been conditioned to ask for permission to be myself.

I had spent so long walking on eggshells and making sure she wasn't upset that I forgot how to do things just because I wanted to.

It sounds small—insignificant even—but the first time I decided without factoring in whether or not she would approve, I felt guilt. A deep, crushing guilt.

That's when I knew.

I wasn't in love. I was in captivity.

The collapse didn't happen overnight. It came in waves. The first few fights were explosive, but I held my ground. Then came the emotional whiplash—manipulation disguised as love.

"I just don't feel close to you anymore."

"Why are you being so cold?"

"If you loved me, you wouldn't need space from me."

And for a while, I believed her.

After all, wasn't love supposed to be all-consuming? Wasn't I supposed to sacrifice for it?

But every time I picked up *Codependent No More*, I saw our relationship spelled out in black and white. The control. The guilt. The cycle of dependency that had defined our whole dynamic.

And worst of all, I saw myself—the version of me that had let it all happen.

There's always a moment when you know it's over.

For me, it wasn't a fight. It wasn't some grand betrayal.

It was a realization.

I was more afraid of leaving than I was of staying.

And when fear is the only thing keeping you in a relationship, you're not in love. You're in a cage.

I knew if I didn't walk away, I'd keep shrinking. I kept losing parts of myself until there was nothing left.

So I left.

And she didn't take it well.

There were tears, accusations, even moments of tenderness where she begged me to reconsider.

But I had finally seen the truth.

I wasn't responsible for her happiness. I wasn't obligated to set myself on fire to keep her warm.

I was allowed to exist for myself.

Leaving wasn't the hard part.

The hard part was learning how to exist without being needed by someone else.

For years, my identity had been wrapped around that relationship. My worth was measured by how much I could give, how much I could sacrifice, and how much I could prove my love through self-denial.

But suddenly, there was no one left to take care of. No one to walk on eggshells for. No one dictated how I spent my time.

And I had no idea who I was outside of that.

It hit me all at once—the space, the silence, the uncomfortable realization that I had spent so much time adapting to someone else that I had no real sense of what I wanted.

I used to tell myself that love meant never leaving. That meant sticking it out no matter what.

But Codependent No More dismantled that illusion piece by piece.

It showed me that love isn't supposed to feel like a job you can't quit.

Healthy relationships don't demand self-erasure.

That my need for space, autonomy, and individuality wasn't selfish—it was human.

I realized I had been confusing control with closeness. I thought she loved me if she wanted to be involved in every decision and needed me by her side 24/7.

But that wasn't love. It was a possession.

It took time, but I started doing things just for myself.

I reconnected with old friends. I picked up hobbies that had been shelved for years. I danced without asking for permission.

And for the first time in a long time, I felt light.

There was no tension in my body when I got a text. No dread when I made plans. No guilt for wanting to be my person.

I was free.

And I realized something:

I had always been free.

I had just forgotten.

If there's one thing Codependent No More taught me, it's this:

**You don't have to prove your love
by losing yourself.**

You don't have to stay small to make someone else feel safe.

And you don't have to be afraid of walking away from something that doesn't serve you.

Leaving that marriage was the hardest thing I've ever done. But in the end, it wasn't that book that destroyed it.

It was the truth.

And the truth, once you finally see it, doesn't let you go back.

Until next time,

Anton Volney

Dancer, Writer, Buddhist



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